LIVING THE ABUNDANT LIFE

April 29, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 Peter 1:17-23
John 10:1-10

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."
-John 10:10b (RSV)

Abundant Life... it is what we all want. In one way or another it is what we are working so hard to achieve. It is what we hope for our children. We may define it differently, but we rejoice when life is lived abundantly and we despair when it is not.

That sentiment is wonderfully expressed in a popular current play, "Shirley Valentine."

It's a poignant and powerful moment when Shirley says...

"I'd lived such a little life. And one way or another even that would be over soon. I thought to myself, my life has been a crime really - a crime against God, because I didn't live it fully. I'd allowed myself to live this little life when inside me there was so much more."

And it was a great and powerful moment when, in the the middle of the drama of his own life, Jesus said: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

That's what Christianity is about, actually - abundant life, "life in all its fullness," another version translates it. "Is there life after death?" might seem to be the quintessential religious question. But for Jesus of Nazareth a prior question, an even more relevant question was, "Is there life before death?" And somewhere in the counterpoint between Shirley Valentine's grim but recognizable description of the human condition as "living a little life... when there is so much more..." and Jesus' strong statement that his purpose had to do with an abundance of life, is where most of us are, I believe.

The play is not about religion in any traditional sense, but as is the case with much good theater, the thematic material is absolutely religious, particularly if we are listening to Jesus on the topic of

Abundant Life. Shirley Valentine is a middle-aged British housewife, mother of two young adults, takes care of her working husband, has a glass of wine or two alone in her kitchen as she prepares the evening meal, and in the absence of anyone else, talks to the wall.

She asks: "What happened? Did something happen or was it just that nothin happened? They got married, they made a home, they had kids and brought them up. And somewhere along the line the boy called Joe turned into 'Him,' and Shirley Valentine turned into this and what I can't remember is what day or week or month it was when it stopped being good."

A friend invites Shirley to accompany her on a holiday trip to Greece. It is unthinkable that she should do something so bold, exciting, without her husband who, it appears, is incapable - or unwilling - to boil an egg. She does it, an act of courageous self-affirmation, a reaching for her dreams, although she never does tell her husband. The sweetest part of her dream is to sit one day by the sea, sipping wine in a land where the grapes are grown and it is there, alone, on the veranda of a Greek tavern, that she reflects so poignantly... in a way I thought was commentary on John 10.

"I mean for weeks, I'd had this picture of myself, sittin here, drinkin wine by the sea: I even knew how I was gonna feel. But when I got to it, it wasn't a bit like that. Because when I got to it, I didn't feel at all lovely and serene. I felt pretty daft actually. A bit stupid and awfully, awfully old. What I kept thinkin was how I'd lived such a little life. An one way or another even that would be over soon... (the importance of this motif was evidenced by handkerchiefs materializing in the audience) I thought to myself, my life has been a crime really - a crime against God, because I didn't live it fully. I'd allowed myself to live this little life when inside me there was so much. So much more that I could have lived a bigger life with - but it had all gone unused and now it never would be. Why - why do I get all this life, when it can't be used? Why - why do I get... all these feelins and dreams an hopes if they can't ever be used? That's where Shirley Valentine disappeared to. She got lost in all this unused life."

Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly." And that moment in "Shirley Valentine" reminded me that Christianity is about living the abundant life, now, in this world, within the perimeters of history. That the promise and hope of the Gospel is about love more powerful than death, an eternal love. But the focus - the place of impact, the essence of the act of God's becoming incarnate in the man Jesus, is the way that shapes, molds, colors, deepens, recreates, converts and fills up to the very brim this life I am now in the process of living.

I learned that personally from a friend, as often happens; from a friend who had challenged me. Her name was Mary. She and her husband were good friends, strong, committed people. Mary had been pushing me, needling me a little bit, urging me to be more forthright and aggressive in support of a cause to which she was totally committed and about which I was, for a variety of reasons - not all of them good - lukewarm. After a Sunday morning worship service, when she had let me have it, she called on Monday

morning. "There's something you do not know about me," she said. "I have cancer. I've had the surgery and the treatments. I feel all right. It's gone... but there are no guarantees. I may live six months or twenty years. But whatever I have left I intend to live it. I used to be shy, reticent, kept my opinions to myself. No more. When I care about something I say it. You see, there is nothing in this life that scares me any more."

On the morning I received that call I sat at my desk a long time thinking about how much of life we let slip through our fingers simply because we are afraid to live it; how much love we carry around in our hearts unexpressed because we never got around to it, or were afraid of the vulnerability which occurs every time we say "I love you"; how much passion for great causes we carry in our hearts because we never took the time to pursue it, or were afraid of what our friends might think, or how our career would be affected; how many hopes and dreams we hide in our hearts, putting them off for some safely vague future when we'll be free enough or comfortable enough or secure enough to give them a try.

Shirley Valentine reminded me again of something I learned personally from that telephone conversation, and have learned from over and over again, namely that in spite of what Jesus said on the topic, Christianity generally is not regarded as a resource for living abundantly. In fact, it is often part of the problem: "To be religious" is assumed to be limited, a bracketing of life, a turning away from life. The simple truth is that what traditional religion there is in the Bible is not portrayed very positively. Throughout the four Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, religion is one of the burdens of life with which people must contend. Religious people, Scribes and Pharisees, are the villains in the story. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus enhances human life wherever he goes, and the religious people object. Jesus makes water into wine to keep a wedding party going, restores sight, heals the lame, is characterized by John as living water and bread of life. In fact, Jesus restores and enhances the gift of life dramatically all the while, without ceasing. There is a steady, consistent, objection by the religious authorities: "Yes, it's nice that the man can walk but it's the Sabbath... she's a sinner... all these people are unclean, so, untidy... and they don't go to church, or keep the Sabbath."

The simple, uncomfortable reality of the New Testament is that religion is one of the reasons people are prevented from living abundantly. Throughout the New Testament, but particularly in the Fourth Gospel, the story is a kind of on-again, off-again, running argument between Jesus and religion which increases in intensity until it comes to the crucifixion which, particularly as John tells it, was a skillfully engineered religious scheme.

Religion in the New Testament often appears life-limiting, life-denying, a grim, tight-lipped, scowling affair, a maze of rules and laws and restrictions and requirements. Religion leaves people like sheep without a shepherd, said Jesus. Or, rather, sheep with a thief imitating a shepherd. And that, more than anything else, seems to have made him angry. Angry enough to pick up a whip and drive the purveyors of this kind of life-limiting religion out of the temple. Angry enough to look them in the

eye and tell them they are like the thief who pretends to be a shepherd and leads the sheep to their demise. In contrast, he says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Part of the challenge is that religion, the very context in which we are gathered this morning, has a way of becoming a deterrent to abundant living: that instead of enhancing life, religion often hems it in, limits and restrains it under a mountain of rituals, rules, and customs.

But another challenge is a cultural context in which there are plenty of available and enormously attractive definitions of abundance. Consider, for instance, the public observance this past week of the sad demise of Crate & Barrel from the corner of Chestnut and Michigan - to rise again, several blocks to the south. The pilgrims were there all week. Last Saturday, in order to purchase - at half price - the icons of abundance, stylishly designed and packaged, they stood four deep all day, in a line which began at the corner, extended west a block, then south, then east on Pearson. When a celebrant finally made it inside, the Holy of Holies, and emerged with the precious item, he or she would hold it high, in the gesture of victory, and the crowd would share the exuberance of the moment by cheering. Sunday, Earth Day, they were back, at dawn's early light, with folding chairs, newspapers, thermos bottles of coffee. All week they returned, to stand in line and wait.

American culture in the past decade decided that the abundant life was abundant in the goods and gadgets of consumerism. In an article on "Baby Boomers" in the Tribune, Jane Ciabattari wrote, "If the Depression attitude was 'You can't have everything,' and the post-war expansionist period created a shared credo, 'You can have everything,' the 1980s taught us 'You should have everything.'"

We bought into that... We spent ourselves and our country into a black hole of debt that our children's children will have to pay back. We watched that mentality express itself in a junk bond empire whose sole product was to make a few fabulously wealthy, shaking to the very core savings and loan institutions, and adding to our bill - now due - sums of money beyond our wildest imagination. We even watched it emerge again in religion as the televangelists promised that God really wants us to have it all, wants us to be comfortable materially, that God will bless those who give generously, that a contribution is actually an investment which will turn a tidy profit, and the money poured in.

While religion has traditionally been life-limiting, the 80s saw an amazing new phenomenon, a religiosity which simply reflected the almost spiritual commitment to consumerism which was characterized as the New Narcissism.

A very sensitive article in The New Yorker last week looked again at the P.T.L. collapse.

The author quoted columnist Dave Barry, who noted that the people who were happily sending in money and supporting the Bakkers were not marginalized, ignorant and poor - but solidly middle class.

The success of P.T.L., says Barry, rested upon the fact that its leaders personalized "a very appealing, convenient moral philosophy that flourished in the 80s... "You can't do good with others unless you feel good about yourself, and you can't feel good about yourself unless you have a lot of neat stuff.'" [Reflections, Frances Fitzgerald, 4/23/90, p. 50]

Sometime in the late 1980s it began to change, says pollster David Yankelovich. The October crash may have had something to do with it, or the junk bond debacle, or the savings and loans collapse, or maybe we just learned the truth... i.e., consumerism becomes idolatry and doesn't work. Whatever precipitated it, it would appear that we have learned that abundant living is not adequately defined by having a lot of "stuff." We learned that you can have it all and still be poor; have full pockets, pantries and bank accounts and still feel empty; be comfortable and ill at ease; be full and yet hungry.

Now the pollsters and the sociologists and the artists are telling us there is a hunger of the spirit. A "yearning," Walter Bruggemann calls it. "It is the resilience of the yearning that causes people to dress up in their heaviness and present themselves for the drama (of worship) one more time." [Finally Comes the Poet, p. 15] People come to church, says Bruggemann, after you penetrate beneath all the superficialities of custom and social expectations, because they yearn - we yearn - for abundant life.

Well, if living the abundant life does not mean having everything you want, furnishing your life with discounted Crate & Barrel accouterments, what does it mean? What is it that the Scribes and Pharisees are missing? What does Shirley Valentine need to find herself - to start living her life again?

It is not "neat stuff." It is not simply the excitement of sex, she discovers, although that is very nice. It is not even living forever in the dream, sipping wine beside the sea.

What Shirley Valentine needs - what we all need - is the gift of abundant life... for that is what it is; not a prize to be earned, but a gift to be received. What we all need is good news - Gospel. And that, the Christian faith proclaims boldly but carefully, is what we have been given... carefully because Gospel is not another list of religious rules.

Gospel is good news that the Shepherd is not a thief. The Shepherd is good. The Shepherd is God's son - who loves us; who lived for us and whose own life demonstrates what abundant life is, if we will but look at it.

The components of abundant life, I would propose to you, are three:

One - Living the Abundant Life becomes possible when you know you are loved; when you know the love of another human being which affirms your very being, accepts you as you are, and will be for you and with you tomorrow come what may; and in the absence of that other, which is the way it is for some of us all of the time and all of us some of the time - to know that in Jesus Christ, the creator God loves you like that.

Two - Abundant Living begins to happen when you know yourself to be loved, enjoy yourself as loved, feel free and secure and good enough about yourself to risk loving back: that human being who loves you for starters, the church, or city, or political party, or social cause which is in your heart: when love makes a lover of you and you begin to live for others, giving instead of receiving, serving instead of being served.

If there is a single consistent response to this church's 25-year-old Tutoring Program it is that it has blessed the tutors. It is designed to enhance the lives of students by helping them learn and that it has done and does, effectively, faithfully, creatively. But the ones whose lives become more abundant because of the program are by no means students only. That is our secret. It is true even for people who are not interested in religion because it's Gospel. Abundant living begins when we live out of our love.

Three - The lesson I learned from Mary: living the abundant life begins when we know there is nothing we need to fear. Two weeks ago this church and churches all over the world were full of people who needed to hear that in spite of the reality of suffering and tragedy in the world eloquently symbolized by the crucifixion of God's son, and in spite of the reality of death - the death of dear ones, their own deaths ultimately - there is no reason to fear. Churches are full on Easter Sunday, understandably, because without that affirmation, there is a hollowness to every proposed abundance of life. But in its wisdom, the ancient Christian church came to call it the Season of Eastertide; not just one day, but an entire season of the calendar: Easter, when the abundance of the earth itself is evident once again... a whole season upon which to build the rest of the year, out of which to live the rest of life... a season which begins on the first day of the week in the early light of dawn at an empty tomb and spreads outward to all the world and forward to all the time ahead.

A season to remind you that the shepherd is good: he knows your name...

A season to remind you that you are loved with a love stronger than death.

A season to remind you that you are free to love others, this world, your neighbors who need you, God who made you - with all the passion in you and all the possibility and hope.

A season to remind you that you are safe. There is nothing to fear.

"I came," he said, "that you might have life, and have it abundantly."

Amen.